Personal Traditions and Satanic Pride
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The cinema will only become an art," Jean Cocteau once wrote, "when its raw materials are as cheap as a pencil and paper."

Cocteau didn't believe that the cost of making movies could ever be anything other than prohibitive, but Implicit in his statement is the conviction that only when it is out of Hollywood's hands and under the control of those who cannot afford it will the cinema at last become an art. It was a pipe dream of his that there should be as many people working with film as there are people keeping journals; that anyone who could mix paint should know how to load a Bolex.

Needless to say, such a standard of accessibility has yet to be achieved. Still, as long as there have been movies, there have been people outside the Hollywood system who have wished to gain creative control over the medium, to play with its machinery or Invent new uses for it. These developments have been given several
names most conceived by their opponents, and thus not quite appropriate: "experimental film" seems too inconclu- sive, as if indicating a lack of success which is often not the case; "under-ground" is too purposefully subversive and is used more often by romantics than radicais; "avant-garde" is often used just to mystify. The only thing these films have in common is that they are usually pro- duced, scripted, directed and edited by (that is, are under the artistic control of) one person. "There's always been the problem of what you call the kind of films I make," Kenneth Anger says. "As far as I'm concerned, they're just films by Kenneth Anger, and it's my own style." They are, first and foremost, personal films.

In America, personal films have traditionally been short (an hour would be an epic length) and adamantly anti-Holly- wood, for it has been the desire of their makers to explore what Hollywood, with its bottom lines both financial and cultural, could never do. Some of these films have been banned for their explicitness; most have been shunned because they appear so unlike the standard Hollywood product.

Personal films first appeared in America in the late Twenties. They were short works made by Hollywood technicians who had Immediate and cheap access to cameras and editing equipment, and who had grown impatient with the formula plots, standard box sets and static cameras of the big studios. At this time, Germany, not the United States, was the world capital of cinematic Invention, and once these technicians saw the expressionistic sets of Paul Leni and Fritz Lang or the magically mobile camera of Murnau, they longed to emulate and develop their techniques.

Working in their spare time, these men began sporadic production of films which, though distributed by the studios, chal- lenged Hollywood's usual output both for- mally and in content. No longer, these men believed, should movies simply be filmed versions of staged dumb shows. Editing and lighting could be used to convey a more subjective, psychological point of view, as

in Paul Frejo's The Last Moment (1928), a depiction of a man's life flashing before his eyes in the final seconds before death. Films could be purely formal inven- tions, images of abstract moving designs,
like Raiph Steiner's shots of light on water In his H20 (1929). They could even be vehicles for subversion, as was James Watson's Lot in Sodom (1933) - a quasi- erotic retelling of the Biblical parable - which was banned by its distributor.

A cross-fertilization process developed. These experimenters would incorporate their new-found techniques into their Holly- wood work, and, as these techniques burgeoned in the mainstream, the more fre- quently and with more precision superim- positions, special effects and animation appeared in personal films. Soon The American Cinematographer magazine began publishing articles on how special effects could be achieved by the amateur. Cocteau's dream seemed near realization.

Instead, it was to suffer a rude awaken- ing. Making movies remained expensive, and while this had little effect on the affluent elite of photographers, scientists and critics who, by now, had foun making an attractive hobby, it eve. forced the original technicians back into commercial work. Those who could afford to stay on formed small amateur clubs, and soon found themselves isolated from the mainstream work which had previously motivated and guided experimentation.

Content to create travelogs and "scientific pictures made with artistic intent," their films lacked the earlier innovation and vigor; a once-noble vision dissolved In complacent slumber.

Cocteau's wish for an absolute access- ibie cinematic technology came closest to fulfillment just after the Second World War. Some servicemen had been trained during the war in the use of movie equipment to shoot newsreels for the home front, and later rehabilitation programmes for return

to civilian life often included film apprecia- tion courses. Film schools proliferated, and much of Hollywood's once-expensive equipment was now so outmoded that it could be had for very little. The result was a huge eruption of personal filmmaking in the Forties and Fifties. It is to this genera- tion that Kenneth Anger belongs.

Like their predecessors of the Twenties, these men and women wanted to liberate the cinema from the mainstream. Some of them explored the medium of film strictly as film-playing with animation and lighting techniques or painting directly on raw stock. Others harked back to the 1928 vision of The Last Moment, producing "psy- chodramatic" or "trance" films concerned with the subjective dreams and fantasies of the repressed unconscious. This repres- sion, they believed, was what rendered Hollywood ineffectual and art less. What was needed was frankness, like a fresh breeze wafting through the stale air of a sickroom.

Owing more to Freud than to Fritz Lang, this new wave of personal films was loaded with erotic and homoerotic im- agery. There was Stan Brak- hage's impressionistic study of masturba tion,

Flesh of Morning (1956), and Gregory Markopoious's Du Sang de la Volupté et de la Mort (1948), which used mythological characters to portray various aspects of homosexual desire. Curtis Harrington ex- pressed his homosexuality with more pes- simism, showing himself physically roped to his mother in On the Edge (1949), and being seduced by female skeletons in blonde wigs in Fragments of Seeking (1946). And, of course, there was Kenneth Anger's Fireworks (1947), a film about S/M, fantasy and masturbation.

These new filmmakers realized that new channels of production, distribution and exhibition were as important as creative controi, and such organizations were soon developed. But, as was the case with their forebears in the Twenties, there were cen- sors lurking about censors who clamped down with particular ferocity on gay films. Oddiy, some of the first alarms were sound- ed within the ranks of the experimental film community itself. Jonas Mekas, editor-in- chief of Film Culture, the house organ of underground film, wrote an article in 1955 in which he warned of the "Conspiracy of Homosexuality" in personal films, of which Kenneth Anger was a major schemer.

Made by gays a dismissible minority at best, Mekas believed these films lacked "what makes any art valuable to humanity: a deeper insight into the human soul.... It is not important to decide here whether or not these neurotic and homosexual poems can be called art. What I want to stress is that this art of abnormality is unmotivated, un- resolved and lacks a moral dimension."

Anger's filmmaking career is an extreme case of the injury self-proclaimed censors can inflict on the creation of a personal art: the French government seized his Marquis of O; Eastman-Kodak confiscated The Love That Whirls when it was sent to them for processing; a skitterish projectionist once refused to show Fireworks for fear of a police raid. The most outrageous of all Anger's fights with censors came in 1964 when Scorpio Rising was seized by the Los Angeles police, acting on a complaint from the American Nazi Party. The film's S/M orgy scene showed a swastika hanging on a wall in the background; the Nazis sued Anger for defamation of their sacred sym- bol. Once the film was brought to the attention of the courts, Anger also faced obscenity charges based on the brief flashes of frontal nudity in the same scene.

After six months of deliberations, Anger won the case - and US film censorship laws have never been the same since. What the filmmakers of the Twenties had done for special effects in American film, Anger had done for the human body.

Scorpio Rising's effect on American cinema has also been felt in a more subtle way. The film is divided into thirteen sections, each one identified on the sound- track by a pop song used to comment ironically on the images, giving them another level of meaning. The songs include suggestive lyrics like "You're just the devil in disguise," and "Wind me up, you'll see just how much a wind-up doll can do." Bobby Vinton croons "She Wore Blue Velvet" while the bikers don their leather gear; the syrupy love ballad "You're Tortur- ing Me" plays during the orgy,

In the early Seventies, many Hollywood directors were to copy this technique, crediting Anger when pressed to acknow- ledge their debt. George Lucas's American Graffiti used pop music as part of its characters' rite of passage from adoles- cense to adulthood, and in The Last Picture Show Peter Bogdanovich filmed a vampish Cybill Shepherd cruising in her daddy's convertible while the radio played "Your Cheatin' Heart."

Anger's relationship with Hollywood has always been an ambivalent one. While other personal filmmakers of his time adhered to the underground tradition and were repelled by Hollywood, Anger, with his interest in myth and ritual, has always remained intrigued. Anger defines ritual as "a kind of stylization and formalization of the sort of random things that take place in a life." It would be difficult to arrive at a betfer definition of Hollywood. Its artificial theatrics, fantastic costumes, impossible sets, heightened romanticism, hyperbolic symbolism and glamorous stars have all become the filter through which Kenneth Anger has presented elements of life, sex- uality and dream.

The sailor's uniform In Fireworks, for instance, is used not merely as decoration, but rather to transform the way sailors have been used in commercial cinema to represent a sexual looseness and vivacity. The pants are stretched tight at the crotch; the powerful stance and height are strengthened by the white uniform being set against the scene's black background; the pose is infused with the mythology of sailors as exotic travelers, as men trained in acts of aggression, men whose lives are spent intimately with other men - the uniform now signifies a homoerotic ideal with strong sadomasochistic shadings.

In Puce Moment (1949), a woman, pre- sumably taking the part of a Twenties glamor girl with a flapper haircut, is shown standing in a glorious art deco boudoir donning a magnificent dress of blue sequins, raising it over her head and slowly letting It flow down over her. Her face in close-up, surrounded in sparkling blue, looks skyward with all the ecstacy of a baroque madonna.

In Scorpio Rising, too, Hollywood makes an appearance: Marlon Brando, as Johnny, the motorcyclist from The Wild One, flickers on a TV set in one biker's bedroom, appearing there almost as an icon.

Even though they do owe so much to Hollywood, Kenneth Anger's films could never have been made within the commer- cial system. They arise from a tradition of personal filmmaking in America, a tradition of filmmakers who took the same Satanic pride in their debunking of Hollywood as Anger did, and who believed, as Cocteau did, that the cinema would only emerge as an art if it were in the hands of people like themselves. The risk-taking - the tight finances, the small audiences, the censors, all that might have deterred them - only gave them more energy.

"It was a kind of pioneering thing that was going on," Anger told us. "It had a certain amount of excitement, where you'd go to a showing and you didn't know if the police were going to bust in or not. Defiance."